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Blighting the journalist's craft

Is the Central Intelligence Agency trying to slide back into the reprehensible practice of using journalists as espionage agents? It appears so, based on recent remarks by CIA Director Stansfield Turner and President Carter.

Both said the CIA reserved the right, in rare instances, to use journalists as cover for spying activities abroad. The trouble is that the functioning and credibility of the media can be impaired if reporters double as government agents, even in a very limited number of cases.

You, as a newspaper reader or television viewer, have a right to expect that news accounts from abroad will be as informative, impartial and accurate as possible. But how can you really have such confidence if you must wonder whether a given reporter is compromised by entanglements with the CIA?

Of course, in actual practice, conscientious reporting and diligent editing may assure that the news stream isn't contaminated by CIA influence. Furthermore, the media have a responsibility to keep their reporters from having conflicts of interest. Yet some of the news comes from foreign journalists and free lancers who are not in the direct employ of the US media. So it would be much bet-

ter if the government had a flat policy against ever employing any kind of journalist as an agent.

And it isn't just impartiality that is involved. The completeness of the news also suffers if potential news sources in foreign countries have to wonder whether they are talking to independent reporters or to undercover agents.

For those reasons, the CIA should forswear all use of journalists as undercover intelligence agents. And as Congress approaches the necessary task of writing a charter to govern the agency's activities, the ban on such a role for journalists should be incorporated in unmistakable language.